

Ted's Career in the Amateurs

By Dennis Payton Knight

Colorado's William Edward Maguiness was born in Greeley in 1904. His dad was a brakeman on the railroad. His mother, a school teacher and pianist, died when he was sixteen. It was to her he owed his love for music, an easy-going but overriding passion that brought him fame and acclaim.

Ted graduated from Sacred Heart High School in Denver in 1922 where he had been class president for three years, playing in the school orchestra, as well as football and basketball. He went on to Denver University to study law and commerce, but eventually his musical aspirations won out over the possibility of a law career. In 1926, Ted joined Ben Pollack's orchestra, playing clarinet and saxophone. He had stints with Glenn Miller and other big bands, but soon formed his own group.

"It was while leading my own outfit and appearing in a San Pedro, California theater that my name was changed," he said in an interview. "There wasn't enough room on the marquee for 'Edward Maguiness and His Band,' so the manager of the playhouse advertised me as Ted Mack and that's how I've been known ever since."

Mack's outfit spent the summer of 1933 at the Chicago World's Fair, and then had a two-month gig in New York City. There he became involved as a talent scout for Major Bowes' Amateur Hour which began on radio in 1934 and ran until the Bowes' death in 1946. During those years, he progressed from talent scout to producer and director of the program.

Mack revived the show on radio in 1948 as "The Original Amateur Hour" and that same year introduced it to the infant television market. It flourished first on the Dumont Network and ran until 1970 after being at various times on each of the national networks.

Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour had something for everyone. The broadcast on Easter Sunday 1959, for instance, featured an opera singer, a trumpet sextet, a dulcimer player, a kiddie dance troupe, a young vocalist, a dancer, a rhythm-and-blues combo, a barbershop quartet, and mother-and-son Irish step dancers.

Among the stars who got introduced by Mack were Gladys Knight, Jose Feliciano, Connie Francis, Ann-Margret, Pat Boone, Jack Carter, and Jerry Vale. Contestants had to pass an audition to make it on the Amateur Hour, and Mack missed sometimes. One of those he turned away was Elvis Presley. He later confessed, "Perhaps there was too much pelvis in Elvis for our show, or his talent had not yet developed, or possibly we just plain missed the boat... He's been heard of in a small way since then."

Ted Mack's pleasant, calming manner put his nervous contestants at ease, and he used the same down-to-earth tone for commercials and public-service announcements. His marriage of fifty years was childless, but he and his wife fostered children in their home from Catholic charities. He died of cancer at his home in New York in 1976.